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## A PLAN FOR READING *A MIDSUMMER-NIGHT'S DREAM*

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Among possible methods of bringing into effective contact the boy or girl and *A Midsummer-Night's Dream* a teacher has wide choice. Aiming to arouse, to strengthen, and to enrich certain latent powers in the spiritual make-up of the boy and the girl by bringing about an interaction between these powers and elements of the play, he must make his decisions in accordance with the capabilities of the individuals who compose any given class. One constant factor in the situation he can count upon: all the pupils delight in life and activity, and *A Midsummer-Night's Dream* is a reproduction of activity and of life as seen by a young man responsive to youth and conscious of its standards of value. First and last the teacher should be mindful of that great advantage of dealing with a play, namely, that a play is first something to be acted rather than to be thought about or pondered ever so weightily. Here is an invaluable lever; boys and girls of high-school age are much concerned about what people do and how and why, and a play is created primarily to show people doing things; in addition it shows how and why they act in a given way. Aside from this most important element in the treatment of a play, there should be much individual difference in the handling of different classes who read the *Dream*. Of various possible plans for guiding boys and girls into an acquaintance with this play, one is outlined in the following notes. This plan assumes that the teacher is in duty bound to give pupils opportunity for initiative, that whether the teacher takes or does not take time to set forth his opinion—in matters of opinion—he should provide occasion for profitable self-expression on the part of the pupil.

For the sake of greater clearness in the presentation of this plan a division is made into successive steps. These have to do

largely with classroom procedure and should not be understood as necessitating identical partition in assignment of work. They do represent stages of progress and therefore must be adapted to individual groups, for each class should have set for it its appropriate pace. With many classes the divisions I-VI should certainly be covered in six recitation periods, division VII deserves another week, and VIII and IX would naturally be carried out in programs for the general assembly or in other extra-classroom activities. Aside from attendance upon a public performance of the play or participating in one, this program, for classes responsive and not too large who have the advantages of good teaching and adequate library facilities, should be completed in about fifteen or eighteen periods. The teacher who has less fortunate conditions should regard this plan as offering for his choice various possibilities.

First of all, certain setting up or tuning exercises are desirable and will in the end prove economical of time. These exercises are oral themes of such a sort as will bring the student into a more sympathetic, comprehending attitude before he opens the book of the play. For the first informal speeches the teacher should select pupils who have previously shown their power to stimulate their fellows by an effective, vivid style. These oral themes, to be of worth, must be unaffectedly enjoyed by the class, including the speaker; to have oral themes given in a lifeless or insincere manner to a listless class is sheer waste of time and a throwing away of a valuable opportunity for social functioning. Under fortunate conditions some of these themes will be based on a review of earlier reading; others should send the pupil to new books to learn about Shakespeare's boyhood and probable boyhood interests. Most delightful reading may be done if there is wise choice of books. Pupils will probably need help before they can restrain themselves from attempting too big a subject and before they can see the greater value of vivid details on a carefully limited topic. Frequently a subject may be divided and the parts presented *serialim* by two or three pupils; this division calls for thoughtful planning of teamwork. The class should be led to feel that in the oral theme each pupil has an opportunity to give help or pleasure. When the right books are not accessible to the pupils, the teacher

will have to present some of the oral themes; lack of time may seem to necessitate the same unfortunate change; but in all cases the teacher must guard against overloading the pupils with information interesting chiefly to himself, and against talking when the pupils should be having opportunity for expression.

A. Topics for oral themes preceding any reading of the play.

1. What Shakespeare's neighbors believed about midsummer night; see Mrs. Frederick Boas, *In Shakespeare's England*.
2. Plays given in compliment to nobility or royalty; see chapters in *Kenilworth*, and pages in Boas, *In Shakespeare's England*.
3. What Shakespeare did in school; see W. J. Rolfe, *Shakespeare the Boy*; Eva March Tappan, *In the Days of Shakespeare*.
4. Stories about Theseus; see "The Minotaur," in Hawthorne, *Tanglewood Tales*.
5. Theseus; see Charles Kingsley, *Greek Heroes* (for older pupils).
6. Hippolyta; see chapter entitled "Hercules" in Emilie Kip Baker, *Stories of Old Greece and Rome* (p. 219).
7. Pyramus and Thisbe; see Josephine Preston Peabody, *Old Greek Folk Stories*.

All of these topics, and not merely three, may be means of bringing the boys and girls of the class nearer to the England of Shakespeare's boyhood. To the Elizabethan spectators of the play the names of Theseus and Pyramus and Thisbe were familiar. We are in danger of forgetting how widely known in Elizabethan times were the *Metamorphoses* and parts of the *Aeneid*, both in Latin and in translation. Classical names and other elements in mythological stories were glibly repeated by many who had never read a book. Halliwell-Phillipps says:

In point of fact, classical allusions were much more general and popular in Shakespeare's age than at the present, and scarcely a ballad can be found of the time of Elizabeth that does not refer to some tale of antiquity. The fate of Pyramus and Thisbe, now confined to boys of public schools (who have read Ovid), was then a subject of popular sympathy.<sup>1</sup>

The question as to what version of the old stories shall be used by the pupil is very important. Between Kingsley's account of Theseus and Plutarch's, for example, there is a world of difference. Little will be gained if an untrained, immature pupil is left to grope his way through handbooks designed for college students

<sup>1</sup> Introduction to *A Midsummer-Night's Dream*.

of literary history. The condensed accounts of Gayley and other scholars, invaluable for the adult reader, have little for the average pupil in the first two years of the high school.

Before leaving the question of oral themes let us note that, when the class has made some progress in the reading of the play, other informal speeches may explain allusions to Elizabethan life and manners; they should always precede oral reading of the scene in which the allusion occurs and should bring fresh information and pleasure to hearers. The themes based on list A, however, should come before any assigned reading in the play. After these have been given, the class should be ready for direct attack upon the play.

I. At the beginning of a period, before the books are put into the hands of the class, the teacher should point out that in *A Midsummer-Night's Dream* we find a wedding to be the beginning and the end, and yet not the heart of the play. Throughout our reading of the play we are occasionally reminded of the wedding, but otherwise we should often forget about it. Expectation of the wedding is somewhat like a frame for the different pictures which we watch, but in connecting, as it does connect, each of the different stories that make up the play, it is also a framework; it joins different parts and holds them in positions of due relative importance. From silent reading of Act I, scene 1, ll. 1-19, let the class discover the people whose marriage is to be celebrated with so much ceremony. This passage and the last song of the fifth act the members of the class should recognize as the outer edge of the framework. They should also observe in response to questions that the first and last scenes of the play have the same setting, that they both occur in the palace of Theseus in the city of Athens. This of course is quite what we should expect for the royal wedding.

With this barest sketch of the framework in mind we should next ask what it incloses and supports. We may get the most immediate answer from discovering the setting of the central portions of the play, Acts II and III and most of IV. These all belong in a wood near Athens. Let the teacher explain that when we fairly give ourselves up to the *Dream* we are in a strange, lovely, moonlit world of shadowy and bewildering happenings.

Such a wood as Will Shakespeare the boy well knew, we see repeopled with fairies, four mortal lovers, and workingmen from Athens. From fireside stories, from school tasks, and from holiday sports had come to the boy pictures and dreams of the greenwood, of mischief-loving Puck, of the wonderful power of the fairies, and of many a charm to bring back a wayward lover; and vivid and lasting in his memory were images of the handicraftsmen of Stratford and the country about. Just such incongruous pictures and people and events Shakespeare shows in the forest of dreams, and the strangeness of the grouping pleases us. The play is a medley of moonshine and moonlight, of farce and poetry, of classic and Elizabethan times, of reality and dream. A five-minute talk by the teacher should characterize the four groups of *dramatis personae* and suggest Puck's part as the presiding genius of the whole action.

After this introduction, the next step involves a departure from the conventional method; it is an attempt to let a certain portion of the class, often dismissed as lacking literary feeling, have an equal chance with the others.

Omit for several periods the first scene of Act I, which sophisticated grown-ups need for the transition into dreamland, and with the class take up the second scene. This second scene is very concrete; the humor is broad and obvious; and with a little help from the teacher the appeal to the interest of even the mediocre majority should be immediate. By way of approach to the first appearance of the "mechanicals" the teacher should interpret the term "mechanicals" and tell why these hard-handed men of Athens come together and what is the occasion on which they hope to give their play. He should explain to the class that these men, though ambitious and very much in earnest, will also be very blundering. Act III, scene 2, ll. 9-13, and Act V, scene 1, ll. 70-75 should be quoted. Before any reading or study of the scene by pupils the teacher should, by little drill or by more, make sure that all members of the class acquire confident familiarity with the sound of every proper name used in the scene, with "Ercles," for example, as well as with "Peter Quince."

In taking up this scene teacher and class should meet on common ground, a readiness to laugh. The scene was created to make

fun, and Shakespeare will have his way even though overlearned critics and oversolemn teachers fall out of step. Let the class read silently in the scene until someone finds something funny, and then another, and another. Get the pupils to point out where the fun comes in and, in general, what there can be in a scene in life or in a school presentation of a play that makes it funny. If the class does not confess that we may get humorous impressions from personal appearance, from posture, bearing, movements, words, and acts, the teacher may assist. Next he should point out that all the parts in this scene are clownish and yet differ among themselves. He should say that the first business of the class is to try to see these workingmen. Several may be able to bring to class pictures of Bottom; some may contribute vivid oral descriptions of handicraftsmen whom they have watched and found interesting—an umbrella-mender, a scissors-grinder, or a cobbler. The impetus of rivalry may be used. These attempts toward visualization should lead to an invitation to show how Bottom would walk across the room, how he would stand, how he looked and acted when he spoke the lines of his third speech in this scene. Reading of the scene and preparation of such simple impersonation may well constitute the first assignment based immediately upon the text.

II. At the next period, after two or three pupils have shown how Bottom might deport himself under such and such conditions, there should be expression of individual opinion from the class; the teacher should guide this discussion and, avoiding adverse comment, should make constructive criticism. There should be discussion of other rôles and of the interrelations of the parts. In talking about the playing of any part and in other planning, the teacher must never forget that an endeavor to get a finished, elaborate production at this point would be utterly destructive. What is desirable is a youthful, immature reaction to values which the members of the class feel.

Pupils and teacher should now fall to upon plans for this simplest acting of the scene. They should decide upon entrances and exits, upon how the people will stand or move about, upon what properties are easily available—in fact, upon all suitable stage business;

and this planning should be worked out through actually standing, walking, entering, and the like. Of course pupils cannot do these things while they sit or stand isolated in aisles or are crowded. Usually the teacher's desk can be pushed aside; the teacher may profitably become one of the audience; and the pupils, as they are chosen to carry through a portion or all of a scene, can use the free space before the class. After such co-operation the pupils should be ready for the assignment for the next day. "Review the scene carefully in order to find the chances to bring out the fun that Shakespeare saw in these people and what they did. Without much memorizing of the words but with care for your cues, be ready to play the rôle assigned to you. If you have a part with few or no lines, you will need to plan more carefully."

In the selection of the parts have nearly half the class take Bottom; each pupil in this group should be responsible for any portion, that is, be ready to play Bottom at any point in the scene. About as many should take the part of Quince, and only one or two should be assigned for each of the other parts. Each member of any group should be responsible for all that is assigned to that group. So far as is practicable, pupils should have their own choice of the rôle to be played, but the teacher should consider the number of lines for a given rôle and have more pupils for the longer rôles. Unless the class is very small, no individual pupil should know, before coming to class, whether he or some other member of his group will be called on to play the rôle assigned to the group.

III. At the next available meeting of the class let different groups, perhaps three, present successive portions (about thirty-five lines) of the scene. Pupils acting or watching should give a minimum of attention to the wording of the speeches and should center their interest on how these people looked, how their voices sounded, and what they said with their hands and faces and shoulders and feet. Give the pupils freedom to use every available kind of natural language.

After the scene has once been played through in this unpretentious fashion, discuss the part of Bottom with the whole class; have them cite single sentences by Bottom to confirm their ideas



of his personality. Next bring out in discussion and through interpretative reading what can be learned from this scene concerning Quince; note especially the attitude of Quince and the others toward Bottom, that Bottom is the chief joy and the greatest trial of Manager Quince. It is to be hoped that some pupil will discover that the notes are helpful; the teacher, moreover, should direct attention to certain passages of later scenes in which the "mechanicals" appear. After all these steps have been taken, the class should be ready for enjoyable oral reading of the scene as a whole.

If the plan thus far outlined seems to have neglected analysis of separate passages and use of the notes, it is that, in my view, the stimulus of a real curiosity should come first. When such questions as "What action by Quince accompanies his first speech?" "How do the other men regard Bottom?" have become practical steps toward impersonation of a rôle, the class will have received the most serviceable impulse toward careful investigation. Parenthetically, the order might be very different with college classes; such students I have sometimes found quite willing to study the glossary and get intelligible readings of the most difficult passages before we took up any act or even any scene. In either case sufficient motivation of some vital sort is the lever; it should be secured before assignment of study of vocabulary and of difficult passages. Oral reading in class, moreover, should be an opportunity given only after the pupil, at least in his own judgment, has understood the content of a scene or a portion of a scene.

In connection with the reading of the play in class the distinctive potential values of oral and silent reading should govern procedure. When the aim is to secure information, silent reading should be the means, since for this purpose oral reading is far from economical of time or interest. For this silent reading strong motivation inevitably results from such attempts to act parts of the play as have been described in the preceding sections. Indeed, an important element in the permanent outcome of these amateurish impersonations is the alert curiosity and purposive scrutiny focused upon passages which are crucial or, from the youthful point of view, difficult. Such examination of lines should precede oral

reading; a considerable background of information must be insured before oral reading can carry its distinctive message. Reading aloud in the classroom is not profitable unless it is interpretative or appreciative, and good oral reading is both. The falling back upon oral reading as a device to make the clock hands go round is beneath contempt. Oral reading, if not permitted too often, should come to be regarded as a reward and a delight. The teacher should occasionally read in turn with members of the class, both so that pupils may feel his satisfaction in what is being read and so that he may by his example pitch the reading of others. Matters of enunciation, quality of voice, carrying power, speed, and vividness may be largely controlled by this unobtrusive means. Never should a class be submitted to the benumbing boredom of listening to unexpressive reading by pupils or by teacher. All should look forward to oral reading as a valuable opportunity for giving pleasure and for expressing one's own delight in the play.

IV. The next portion of the play to be taken up may well be three scenes that bring in, first the fairies, next the "mechanicals," and thirdly both the fairies and the "mechanicals." The suggestions given for Act I, scene 2, should be followed here with some modifications. Arrange for two groups, one to act the fairies in Act II, scene 1, ll. 1-187 and the other to present the "mechanicals" and also Puck and Titania in Act III, scene 1, ll. 1-201. Point out the contrast between the blundering awkwardness of the laboring men of Athens and the grace and swiftness of the fairies. Every pupil should share Puck's delight in his opportunity for mischief and fun. Something that will at least suggest the ass's head should be used in Act III, scene 1, ll. 102-201; movable ears are especially advantageous.

V. If the class is large, a group may be detailed, even before the scenes already considered have been played, to study the part of the four lovers in Act I, scene 1, ll. 157-251, and in Act II, scene 1, ll. 188-246. As preparation for these scenes the group will need to read Act I, scene 1, ll. 20-126, and to give to the class a brief statement of the situation.

VI. After such unpretentious acting of portions of the play the class should have considerable familiarity with the first two acts

and an intelligent and sympathetic attitude toward the play as a whole. Subsequent programs may follow the more conventional order. Never, however, should there be called for those deadly written themes which are either paraphrases of parts of the play or enumerations of details of the action. There is use for oral themes on specific aspects of the action, as, for example, on Puck's blunders with the magic juice. The talk in class about the play should be directed toward larger considerations of personality and action and not into the minutiae of criticism. Books about Shakespeare's boyhood and the England of his time should be drawn upon for illustration.

VII. The procedure already suggested should have prepared the class for: (1) reading, outside of the recitation period, of an act as a whole; (2) effective oral reading in class; (3) reading, by the skipping method, to trace the structure of the plot; (4) reading to discover the beauty and poetry of particular portions of the play; (5) learning of passages by heart; (6) such study of text, appreciation, and literary history as fortunate opportunity may permit.

VIII. Before the class turns from the play, the pupils should have an opportunity to hear Mendelssohn's translation into music of some of the feeling and atmosphere of the *Dream*. First of all some appreciative interpreter of music should explain the construction, should play separately some of the motifs, and thus prepare the pupils to listen to the music with understanding and sympathy. The Overture, the Scherzo, and, for the musically untrained, the Wedding March, should be played on the piano, or still better by piano and orchestra; as a last resort a victrola might be used. Whether this program occupies part of a class period or of a general assembly, another should be closely connected with it. This other program should include several oral themes concerning Mendelssohn's success, and that remarkable performance of 1827 in which early work by Shakespeare and by Mendelssohn had splendid presentation in the Royal Theater.

IX. There should be some definite plan for synthesizing and organizing the impressions made by the preceding work with the play. The most obvious means, from which teacher and class may

choose, are (1) attendance upon a professional performance; (2) an uninterrupted reading aloud of the play before the class; (3) the performance of the play by the class. For performance, the best acting versions of the play should be consulted; for the reading of the play, which should occupy not more than eighty minutes, the teacher must solve the delicate problem of making such a "cutting" as shall satisfy lovers of Shakespeare.